Film Features

Scorpio Rising: Kenneth Anger Interviewed

David Moats , June 2nd, 2009 06:01

Experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger talks about porno, the occult and his former neighbour Elliot Smith as a collection of his early films *The Magick Lantern Cycle* is released by the BFI.

Talking to Kenneth Anger is a bit like listening to a sweet old grandfather wittering on about his stamp collecting habit and reminiscing about his poker buddies — except that his hobby was making groundbreaking experimental films and his buddies were people like Dennis Hopper and Mick Jagger.

The Octogenarian is equally nonchalant talking about his friend musician Bobby Beausolei, who ended up in the Manson family and completed one of his soundtracks in jail; or his film version of *The Story of O* which, unbeknown to him, was largely funded with ransom money from the infamous Peugeot kidnapping. His life and career seem to have been a series of ridiculous coincidences, which perhaps explains why he practises the occult (or maybe why we should?). Anger was peripherally involved in every major counter-culture movement in the mid part of this century. In the late 40s he befriended Surrealist filmmaker Jean Cocteau, who got him a job at the Cinémathèque Française working alongside the future directors of the French New Wave; he befriended Dr. Kinsey, the driving force behind the sexual revolution in

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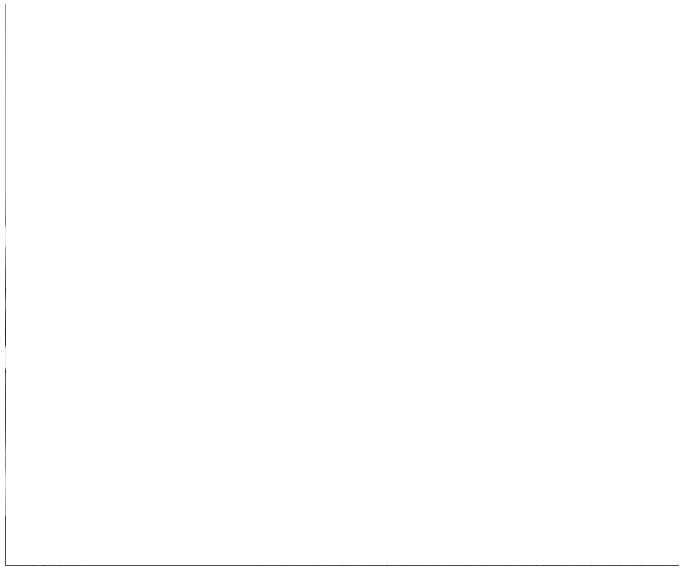
America; he lived in Haight-Ashbury when the hippies moved in, then spent some of the late 60s in London hanging out with The Stones, Marianne Faithfull and finally Jimmy Page, who he met at an auction of Alistair Crowley memorabilia.

In the meantime, he was creating some of the most influential experimental films of the 50s, 60s and 70s — including *Fireworks*, one of the first films to feature explicitly homoerotic content; *Scorpio Rising*, a send-up of biker culture which was one of the first films to use a pop music soundtrack; and *Lucifer Rising*, a psychedelic homage to Crowley's work.



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Anger's films rarely have a narrative but neither are they designed to be played in the background of an art gallery. They hypnotise the viewer with repetition and subliminal references. His matching of music with image makes his work an important influence on music videos. Unlike many of his followers however, his films are full of cynicism, irony and a devilish sense of humour.

The Quietus sat down with Anger recently before a screening at the BFI.

Last I heard you were working on *Gnostic Mass*, a documentary about an occult ritual in America.

I filmed it in a rough form but I have to completely reshoot it. I did a study of the last 40 minutes of the actual ceremony and I have to find the money to do it again. I'm an independent artist, not working in commercial cinema, and the problem is finding the money to fund my longer projects. I can manage the short ones on my own, by short I mean 8-10 min, but when it gets to be nearly an hour it's a problem for me.

Were you ever tempted to try commercial cinema to fund these projects?

No. [long pause] And it's not that I tried knocking on their door and got turned down. I've never done that but I have written a longer project in France. I got permission from the publisher of an erotic book called *Histoire d'O* [The Story of O], which was later

made into a rotten commercial film, which I never saw because it would spoil my vision. But even with the help of some literary people I couldn't find the money to do it so I just move on and make another short film if the longer ones don't work out.

Of the many longer projects you have conceived of that haven't been realised, which of them do you most regret not happening?

Well, *The Story of O*, would have been beautiful because I was doing it in the style of Robert Bresson, like *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* which is very understated. The subject is kinky eroticism but in my concept, I never showed anything. There are things implied but it's a bit of a tease.

Which you have said is more powerful.

Yes, suggestion. Which is why I'm quite opposed to . . . I'm not advocating censorship, but to me, porno is a very problematic area because they defeat what they're doing by having too much and too long and you get very bored with it, it's like watching a sewing machine or something.

You've stated that your first film *Fireworks* came from a dream. Do you often draw on your dreams?

I can't because they're too expensive. I can dream in CinemaScope and IMax but those type of dreams are what I would call 'entertainment' although some people might call them nightmares. Some people dream in black and white, I dream in colour, but I believe that my dreams very rarely have any speech they are mostly just visions so in that way they're like my films

Is that why you don't use synced dialogue, only music?

It started out of necessity because my early films were made with the family home movie camera which was a 16mm camera called a Cine-Kodak which held 100 feet — one shot would last a minute if you wanted to push it. The challenge was to make them silent and not use speech and I decided that I liked it as a technique so most of my films are that way. I have made a film with a musician called *Elliot's Suicide* about Elliot Smith who was a friend of mine who committed suicide in October 2003 and I did a film with him before that happened.

Did you live near him?

Yes we both lived in a district called Silver Lake and we were both neighbours. He used to play in a club which would hold about 20 people, about the size of this room,

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just for fun. He had a serious drug problem and he had a fight with his girlfriend. She locked herself in her bathroom, which is a very bad thing for a woman to do in a quarrel, the symbolism is all wrong, and he went into the kitchen opened the drawer pulled out a steak knife and stabbed himself in the heart, which is really overdoing it. He was only 34 so we'll never know what he could have produced but he did some wonderful songs. This one particular song which I used full-length in one of my films is called "Rose Parade" — "follow me down to the rose parade" — that's the famous parade every year in Pasadena. He was from New York but when he settled in California he used to go to the Rose Parade after being up all night and stoned and he was seeing it through the filter of . . . I guess heroin, I don't know, I never went with him but I understood that he enjoyed watching it in that state. I went back and filmed segments of the actual parade and included it in a film.

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People sometimes associate you with punk or proto-punk, perhaps because of your visual style and DIY attitude. How do your see yourself in relation to that music?

Well, The Sex Pistols, I found out, had rented my films and were showing them as moving wallpaper behind their concerts and I thought that was funny — turning off the *Scorpio Rising* soundtrack. I got to know them a bit later on and I didn't object. There was no point, because they already did it! [laughs]

Your films are full of provocative imagery, have you ever had trouble with censorship?

Scorpio Rising was denounced — and this was ironic — at its first screenings by some members of the American Nazi Party. They thought I was insulting their flag, which was very true, not that you see very much of it. They phoned up anonymously to the vice squad in LA and denounced it as porn or obscene or something and in those days in '64 the police *had* to investigate if they got a complaint. They went there and without even watching the film, they just seized it and the poor manager of the theatre was arrested and had to be bailed out. But then it went to the California Supreme Court and a famous ruling came down which applied to all films: if it has redeeming social merit then it's acceptable, and of course this label has been used for all kinds of things.

And from Christians? You used images of Jesus as well as Nazi flags.

I once used clips from a Lutheran Sunday School film called *The Last Journey to Jerusalem*. It was delivered to me accidentally while I was cutting *Scorpio Rising* and left on my doorstep because of a mistaken address and I just kept it and cut it into my film. It was serendipity from the 'other' powers or what ever you want to call them, not necessarily the gods but maybe the prankster gods. After the film was shown all around the country, I got a letter from the Lutherans — "Aren't you using our Sunday school film?" — and I said "Yes, it's called 'fair use'" and said, "You should be ashamed of showing this kind of cliche stuff to children. Showing a simpering Jesus is not really helpful". So much of the iconography of Christianity has become so sanitised that you wonder, who was this person way back when? I've discussed this with Marty Scorsese who did an interesting film called *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

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Can you tell us what you are working on right now?

I'm consistently making films, I have been since I was a teenager. I recently finished a 35mm film using archive material, which I love working with, on the Hitler youth called *Ich Will!* which means "I want" in German. That was an interesting project. I showed a film at the Imperial War Museum last year which was a work in progress, and I'm sill working on it. It's called *Uniform Attraction* about the power of uniforms to transform . . . basically men, even though women do wear uniforms, too but it's a thing about how uniforms transform people.

So it's a bit of irony but it's also kind of an homage. I'm still collecting material for that.

***The Magick Lantern Cycle* is available now on BFI DVD and Blu-Ray.**

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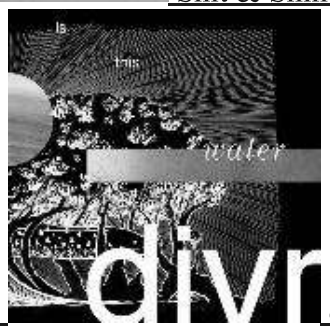

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